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Statement by Misión Mujer A.C., a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Adolescents: a challenge to comprehensive development

1. Teenage pregnancy is an issue currently facing youths worldwide. It imposes responsibilities on them for which they are socially unprepared because adolescence constitutes a moratorium with regard to the psychosexual capacity for intimacy and the psychosocial readiness to become parents.[1] They prematurely pass from adolescence into adulthood. Adolescent girls find themselves becoming mothers without any preparation. With this unexpected situation come a host of social and personal frustrations that force them to make an abrupt change in their life plans.

2. In the Americas region, the average age for the commencement of sexual activity is 14 years; half of all adolescents under 17 years of age are sexually active. According to the Ministry of Public Education, in our country [Mexico] there are 9,579 adolescents between 12 and 18 years of age who are at risk of dropping out of primary or secondary school because they are pregnant or are young mothers.[2] Moreover, in 2009, according to the Mexican Ministry of Health, 18 out of every 100 registered births were to women less than 20 years of age. Given that this number has not decreased over the last 10 years, but has actually gone up, the issue is increasingly becoming a public health challenge, in addition to its social, economic and familial repercussions.

3. Teenage pregnancy is an obstacle to the comprehensive development of adolescents in Mexico and in a number of countries around the world. A pregnant teenager is socially stigmatized and forced to remain at home or begin working, something for which she is not yet prepared. The stigma that is attached to her child, which varies according to social group, turns the child into a problem. Being a teenage mother means having to leave school and wrestle with underemployment, mistreatment, frustration and resentment, which, in turn, force teenage girls to change their life plans.[3]

4. Although the consequences of teenage motherhood are obvious, the reasons and motives for deciding to have sexual relations at such an early age, without using contraceptives, are confusing and numerous.

5. Among the many possible reasons are: the early start of sexual activity among youths; insufficient training; lack of adequate information on sexuality; low educational and economic level; poor planning and low expectations of youths with regard to their future (life plan); the poor image of women and the lack of appreciation for them; feelings of loneliness and rejection; the inability to deal with emotions; emotional dependency; the lack of awareness and preparation when taking decisions; the sexualization of adolescents, as a result of which their sense of worth is socially linked to their physical attractiveness; or the absence of mothers and fathers who are committed to the comprehensive development of their children.

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[1] Erikson, E., Sociedad y Adolescencia (Mexico City, Siglo XXI Editors, S.A. de C.V., 1986).

[2] Nurit Martínez. "Preocupa deserción escolar de adolescentes embarazadas", El Universal (Mexico), 25 May 2005. Available at: www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_nota=125440&tabla=nacion (consulted on 18 November 2009).

[3] Soto de Jesús, Maribel, "Los cambios en el proyecto de vida de la adolescente embarazada", Mexico, available at: www.adolescenciasema.org/index.php?menu=documentos&id=44&id_doc=209&show=1, 2007 (consulted on 18 November 2009).

In view of the above, one may conclude that the issue of teenage pregnancy is multifaceted. A study done by Maribel Soto de Jesús and others found that adolescents:

- View themselves as objects rather than moral or ethical beings;
- Lack self-confidence and security;
- Are not capable of resisting pressure to have sexual relations;
- Are afraid of rejection;
- Believe that they are invulnerable and that nothing will happen to them, because such things only happen to others;
- Sometimes use pregnancy as a means of avoiding family problems and getting out of the house in order to start their own families, which usually end in failure;
- Have low ambitions in life;
- Have very few plans for themselves;
- Seek to temporarily fill the emotional void in their lives through their partners;
- Have little interest in school, family or community activities;
- Succumb to the desire to feel pleasure or to engage in spontaneous sexual intercourse;
- Lack personal values and self-esteem and are insecure and afraid of being abandoned by their partners if they do not consent to sexual activity (however, they are usually abandoned anyway);
- Come from families that are dysfunctional or lack a father figure. A difficult and conflictual family setting may lead adolescents to believe that sexual activity, in addition to providing a source of pleasant company, offers the possibility of pregnancy as a means of escape and an opportunity to start a new life, which generally does not come to pass. Pregnancy, however, complicates the rest of their adolescence.

6. Teenage pregnancies are not only a tragedy or a social expression of the problems of adolescent girls, but also a reflection of the combined pressures and limited options available to help them manage the associated risks, starting with acceptance of their new situation and awareness of the need to face reality and understand that from the moment they know they are pregnant, their lives will never be the same. It is not easy for pregnant girls to face their parents, friends and society in general.

7. The proposals we have developed are the product of our 10 years of experience as a non-governmental organization providing care and preventive training for approximately 18,000 adolescents in public secondary schools, and through the "Axios" values programme. Our approach to this issue takes into account the actual situation and not only theoretical assumptions.

8. It is not enough to give adolescent girls information about their sexuality. Adolescents, both male and female, also need more life opportunities, especially with regard to decision-making and life planning, which are two underlying factors

in adolescence that can protect vulnerable teenagers from situations that are difficult to cope with at their age, such as pregnancy.

9. Efforts should be made to influence the life plans of both male and female adolescents, and to motivate them to have valid reasons for postponing the early onset of sexual activity, so that their self-worth and interest in life take precedence over being mothers and fathers at an early age. This includes encouraging adolescents to plan and carry out appropriate actions, and building positive social networks which foster appropriate decision-making, so that they are capable of thinking about their actions and making mature decisions.

10. Society should be educated about the importance of having a father figure in the home, where this is conducive to a harmonious relationship between the parents (since this is one of the major factors in the prevention of teenage pregnancies), and the need for him to have a closer and better relationship with his children. There is an emotional interaction, without social prejudice, in which the father figure's presence and actions in the home are important and significant, not only as "the male family breadwinner", but also as the "male who moulds the family".

11. Adolescents should be encouraged to receive preventive training in the values, knowledge and services that will empower them.

12. Families should be encouraged to participate in the comprehensive sexual education of their children and, in society at large, it is incumbent upon all of us to raise our awareness about this issue, which is part of the social fabric.